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ABSTRACT

This report examines the opinions of 726 registered voters in 5 small, rural mid-west school districts. The purposes of the study were: (1) to assess citizens' satisfaction with the school districts' programs and services; (2) to indicate strengths and weaknesses in the school districts' programs and services; (3) to identify problems facing the school district; (4) to indicate citizens' willingness to support new programs; and (5) to suggest alternative practices. Registered voters were randomly selected from the five school districts to complete the survey instrument. Data were analyzed with an exploratory factor analysis procedure. The analysis resulted in 12 significant factors, including "liking school," "students' need to work hard," and "the importance of co-curricular activities." The findings suggest that citizens' opinions were similar across school districts. When local citizens are satisfied, they are satisfied about most programs and services. Conversely, when they are dissatisfied, they are dissatisfied about most programs and services. School districts need to continually ascertain public opinion concerning the district and to keep the community informed about available programs and services. In addition, properly polled information can be extremely useful in soliciting public support for school reform efforts. (LP)

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Common Factors Underlying Public Opinion of Local Schools from Five Rural, Mid-West Communities

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Abstract

726 registered voters from five rural, mid-west school districts completed written survey instruments indicating their opinions of their local school district. Discriminant analysis of responses indicated that opinion on the school is sharply polarized: either respondents liked their school or they disliked it. An exploratory factor analysis identified twelve common themes underlying the development of this overall pattern. Two important implications are forwarded: first, districts need to continually ascertain their public's opinion concerning the district; second, properly polled this information can be extremely useful in soliciting support for reform efforts.

Common Factors Underlying Public Opinion of Local Schools from Five Rural, Mid-West Communities

For the past 23 years the annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Polls (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1991) have reported citizens' opinions regarding issues facing the policy makers of our nation's schools. As Bugher & Duckett (1984) stated "Gallup suggested that one way to make certain that the public schools will continue to get support from the majority of citizens is to involve more of them in the activities of the schools and in the educational process generally" (p. 3). As the opinions expressed in these national polls represent those of the nation's citizens as a whole and not those of the citizens of individual communities, it seemed useful to use a similar method of polling to ascertain citizens' opinions regarding their own local schools. Thus, in response to a call for school improvement proposals made available by the Illinois State Board of Education, the superintendents of five rural, K-12 school districts entered into a collaborative agreement

to seek their constituents' opinions about their local schools.

This select group of neighboring school K-12 districts were similar in that each was unable to fully meet all of its constituents' schooling demands. In an attempt to meet survival demands, these rural, K-12 districts had previously been involved in cooperative agreements which authorized some sharing of resources across school district boundary lines. Sloan and Nolin (1981) previously reported on the efforts of small, rural school districts to create interschool cooperation models as an alternative to meeting the educational demands of local school constituents. In this study each of the rural, K-12 school districts was facing similar issues, challenges, and concerns, including, but, not limited to, escalating costs, reducing revenues, aging facilities, changing student enrollments, limiting curricular programs, and continuing pressures to meet state mandates.

As the average daily attendance of these five, rural, K-12 school districts ranged from 277 to 890 students, these K-12 school districts were facing

similar school-size pressures. In order to address the complexity of the school-size pressures, these districts decided that they needed to further explore whether the issues and trends being evidenced in each of the districts were similar to or different from those issues and trends being evidenced in districts of similar social, political, economical and fiscal bases. These districts determined that they needed to systematically collect the same kind of data for each district and across the districts to facilitate planning alternatives in an attempt to meet programmatic pressures for rural, K-12 programs at the local level.

According to Ornstein (1989), proponents of larger, consolidated schools support economies of scale and curriculum quality as factors to weigh in meeting district needs. Peshkin (1982) identifies the factors of traditional community autonomy, vitality, integration, tradition, and identity as important to weigh in meeting needs of districts seeking to maintain small schools. Thus, these districts proposed a collaborative project to assess citizens' opinions

across each of their districts using a single instrument based upon the format and structure of the annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa polls.

The purposes of the study reported here were (a) to assess local citizens' opinions regarding their level of satisfaction with the school district's programs and services, (b) to indicate strengths and weaknesses observed in the school district's programs and services, (c) to identify problems facing the school district, (d) to indicate citizens' willingness to support program options not currently available within the school district, and (e) to suggest alternative practices which could potentially improve the school districts' programs and services for each of the districts. The data were reported for each of the districts and across the districts.

Methods

Subjects

The list of registered voters was obtained from each of the five school districts, totaling 8,750 individuals. A twenty percent random sample was then drawn from each district, with care taken to insure

that only one survey was sent to any single household. This sampling procedure resulted in identifying 1,770 potential respondents.

Instruments

A written survey instrument was developed to collect the data for this study. The first part of this instrument asked basic demographic characteristics about the respondent and his or her family: how many years the respondent has lived in his or her school district; the number, ages, and school status of each child living in the household; and, if the respondent does not currently have any children in the district how long had it been since the respondent had a child(ren) attending school. In addition, the respondent was asked to characterize his or her marital status, own educational level, type of employment, and estimated family annual income.

The remainder of the survey asked broad questions concerning the respondent's opinion of their local school district. Each respondent was asked to: grade each of the major school facilities and programs on an "A" to "F" scale; to indicate if current curricular

offerings ought to be changed; how important different curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular programs were in the respondent's estimation of school operations and a child's education (on a three point Likert scale); and what problems were perceived as existing with the current structure. Each respondent was also asked to indicate his or her preferences regarding school improvement options being considered by the local school board.

Procedure

Surveys were mailed to each selected respondent, together with a introductory letter from the district superintendent and a pre-addressed postage paid return envelope, in mid April of 1991. Five weeks were allowed for survey return. No additional efforts were made to facilitate the return of non-respondents.

Results and Discussion

A total of 726 residents returned surveys, of which 30 had to be disqualified due to incomplete or incoherent responses. Thus 696 surveys were included in the analysis, making an overall usable response rate of 41%. A chi-square analysis of response rate by

district failed to show significantly differing response rates between the five districts ($p > .05$).

Differences between districts

An exploratory discriminant analysis (using SPSS/PC+) was performed first to discover any systematic differences existing between the five districts. This analysis extracted two significant functions, the first accounting for 32.6% of the pooled variation with the second accounting for 24.2%. None of the other potential functions were significant at the .05 level.

District centroid analysis and post-hoc classification allowed for preliminary interpretation of these functions. Function One clearly distinguishes between districts "B" and "E" (the extremes according to this function), failing to separate among the other discriminant pairs.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Examination of the Varimax rotated standardized function coefficients for the 43 variables (survey

items) entered revealed a coherent meaning underlying this function. Twelve items comprise the bulk of this function, with residents of one of the districts ("B") tending to take a generally positive attitude towards their district on these items, while residents of the other district ("E") tended to take a mostly negative view.

High school quality, past years performance, respondent opinion of the school board, convenience of location, and size of the junior high school all were items rated consistently. While drug and alcohol use were acknowledged as a potential problem area in both districts, drug and alcohol use seemed to be of a higher concern for District "B". This response suggests that respondents perceive drug and alcohol abuse to be a more pressing issue only when they are generally satisfied with other aspects of school operation. Another important component combined the perceived quality of the elementary school, apparently unneeded changes being made in the curriculum, and out of repair school district buildings and facilities. Negative respondents tended to identify these common

themes when discussing District "E". Opinions were further split between these two districts regarding plans for raising additional capital. Respondents that were generally pleased with their district favored plans to reorganize programs internally while those displeased expressed a desire for raising school taxes.

The second function echoed this negative sentiment by distinguishing between the same District "E" and a different one of the remaining four in the study (District "C"). The eleven items in this separation continue the theme that residents displeased with their school district tend to express a uniformly negative opinion. Displeased residents of District "C" were definitely less concerned about such things as possible drug and alcohol abuse by students. They also felt that the conditions of district buildings were less of an issue. These respondents indicated that a larger high school (and somewhat larger class sizes) would be acceptable.

Most importantly, these respondents exhibited a consistently low opinion of high school quality, the administration, the school board, and the district in

general. Their responses clearly indicated that they believed school quality and student discipline are not up to expected standards. The respondents valued highly the importance of academic quality, yet felt the teachers of their district were only delivering B to C performance for their students. There was abundant dissatisfaction with the school/district administration and board, and a strongly expressed desire to seek change in any form.

Two important conclusions need to be made from these analyses. First, it is possible to distinguish a school system whose voters are generally pleased with district from one whose voters are not. Specific areas of concern can be identified. At times these concerns polarize quite distinctly depending on voter perceptions. Second, these areas of concern appear to be thematically consistent across the two functions analyzed. It was only the degree of the opinion, not the items on which the opinions were made, that allowed the separation. This finding argued for a clarification of the themes through which the respondents view their local schools.

Similarities among the respondents

An exploratory factor analysis was then performed to ascertain a more precise nature of the common thread of opinion running throughout these districts. An exploratory factor analysis using the method of Principal Components with an orthogonal Varimax rotation was applied to the 43 variables. This procedure extracted 12 significant factors (eigenvalues > 1.0) accounting for 63.5% of the total variability in individual response (see Table 1). Survey item standardized loadings greater than .3000 were examined, together with the distributions of individual item responses, to create meaningful interpretations.

Insert Table 1 about here

Factor 1: "I Like/Dislike my School". The first, and by far the most cohesive, of these factors was a single factor accounting for 18% of the total opinion variability. This theme, consisting of responses to 12 different survey questions, centered around the respondents' overall attitude towards the school's

administration, teachers, board of education, and facilities. This factor included opinions on whether the respondents felt the school had improved over the last five years and if the respondents had a positive attitude towards the school.

As the strongest of the common factors, the analysis of this item is fairly clear. Respondents appeared to form, from a number of different sources, a single unified view of their school district. If that view was positive, it tended to be an equally distributed positive view across many areas of school functioning. While this factor does not rule out individually divergent opinions, the general theme is clear: if you tend to like you school you tend to like most aspects about that school; if your overall opinion is negative, that negativity extends across many aspects.

Factor 2: "Students Need to Work Hard in High School". The second commonality of opinion used 6 items to account for 6.8% of the total opinion variation. This theme centered on a linkage between positive views of the junior and senior high school and

a feeling that students need to work hard to achieve particular objectives. This factor was also tied to a common response that the school district needs to keep its offerings current ("meeting today's [educational] needs" was the dominant survey choice).

In a sense, this factor reports that both students and schools are partners in the hard work necessary for successful learning. Individuals on the other side of this coin tended to feel that change was more intrusive and disruptive to the process, that students were already working hard enough, and that schools should concentrate on improving existing offerings rather than seeking new ones.

Factor 3: "The Importance of Co-Curricular Activities". Both co-curricular activities and athletic programs were viewed as either consistently fairly to very important or not so important by the respondents. Regardless of an individual's particular preference, this factor comprised of three items accounting for 6.3% of the variability, was expressed as a leading element in many respondents' stated preferences of important items in choosing a school for

their child(ren). The actual responses across all of the districts tended to show a high favorability for these activities, indicating that many of the respondents feel that athletics and co-curricular programs are an important part of a child's educational process. Beyond the school day itself, these activities are the ones most in the public's view, allowing for the related impression of great importance.

Factor 4: "The Size of the School". A desire for a uniformity of school size accounted for 5.8% of response variability. When the three questions relating to this factor were examined, it was clear that most respondents favor a smaller school, under 400 students total. This factor was not surprising, as each of the districts included in this study were traditionally smaller districts serving rural populations.

Factor 5: "Starting Students Right". This factor consistent of four questions which accounted for 4.3$ of the variation in responses is very similar in nature to Factor 2: A Hard-Working Orientation. The

difference in this case is the relationship of responses indicating that examples of hard working activities are linked to elementary school curriculum and performance by the respondents. As before, individuals favoring modifications see a move towards a more rigorous program, except that in this factor it was extended into the elementary levels. When respondents felt comfortable with the elementary offerings their responses tended to indicate that students were already working at the right level of student challenge.

Factor 6: "The Problem of Alcohol and Drug Abuse". Although specific questions were asked addressing alcohol and drug abuse respondent replies, accounting for 3.9% of total response variation, indicated that respondents did not separate alcohol abuse from drug abuse. The shared opinion is that both alcohol and drugs are fairly serious problems, according to a strong majority of the respondents. That this factor did not score as very serious seems to indicate that, while drug and alcohol abuse are acknowledged by many

respondents, it is not one of the major issues about which there is inordinate concern.

Factor 7: "I Want to Move my Child to Another School". Three questions addressing the need for more high school emphasis on college preparation, a desire to see greater changes occurring in the high school, and a sense that taxes should be increased to pay for such changes are all bound up in this single factor. Accounting for 3.5% of response variability, this factor suggested that respondents dissatisfied with the current school system are willing to take steps, whether in terms of paying more or moving their children to other education opportunities, to insure their child's college entrance and success.

It is interesting to note, however, that the majority of respondents to this factor's questions did not express a desire to move their children. The respondents indicated that there was a good mix of college and career preparation taking place in the schools, and that school improvement should take place through the perceived less-costly method of reorganization. Thus, while reasons for those who want

to move their child(ren) out of the district appear clear, they are in the minority of total respondents to this survey instrument.

Factor 8: "The Size of my Child's Classes". This factor (accounting for 3.4% of variability) is very similar to Factor 4, Size of School. Four questions incorporate several of the same ideas. The size of the classes, in addition to the size of the school, was viewed as important and is judged as fairly important by the respondents when choosing a school for their child(ren). The linkage with the Size of School factor would suggest that smaller individual class sizes are favored over larger ones.

Factor 9: "Students Should Get Good Grades and Jobs". The ability of the school to enable its students to achieve well, both in and out of school, is an attribute favored by most respondents. Explaining 3.2% of the overall response variability, this factor seems to follow a general theme of both internal quality and external post-graduation accountability. Respondents seemed to expect that good grades while in school will relate to job success out of school. The

perceived ability of the school to enhance this relationship is reflected in this factor.

Factor 10: "The School Should Help Working Parents". A commonality was demonstrated in several items dealing with the kind of issues one might expect to be of concern to respondents where both (or the only) adult in the family works during the day. These items relate to a positive support for school-sponsored, day-care activities, the extension of the school day by one hour, and self-guided program activities for the students. Rather than being related to particular curricular desires, these items centered around a caretaking view of the school. Although accounting for only 2.9% of total response variability, this factor is one indication of the diverse expectations of the public educational system held by some district respondents.

Factor 11: "Teacher Quality and Student Discipline". Another of the several items identified as important to respondents in choosing a school for their children, this factor (2.7% of total response variability) links the high quality of the

instructional staff with an emphasis placed on student discipline. It appears that respondents believe that high caliber instruction encourages an ordered and controlled environment. Respondents indicated that the two items, quality and discipline support each other.

Factor 12: "Retain my Child [in grade] only with my Consent". This final factor established a linkage between a positive attitude toward the school, a belief in hard working students, and a desire not to retain students in a grade without the consent of the parent. Retention was viewed, at least in part, as a failure of the school to accomplish many of the objectives that have been set for it in caretaking for the student. When there is a high degree of approval, respondents may be indicating a desire not to be surprised by unexpected shortcomings. Conversely, when school confidence is low (respondents having a less than positive attitude and a belief that students are not working as hard as they might), respondent desire for parental intervention in the retention process is much more modest. This factor, accounting for the smallest amount of explained variation (2.6%), may just be a

further indication of the level of confidence placed in the school to accomplish particular objectives (such as good grades for students). When confidence exists, and students do not succeed, there appears to be an expressed desire that parents become reinvolved in the process of their child's education.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that citizen opinion in these five rural, K-12 school districts is similar across districts. When local citizens are satisfied, based on the opinion responses provided by the citizens polled in this study, they are satisfied across most programs and services. Conversely when they are dissatisfied, they are dissatisfied across most programs and services.

Through the district's efforts to poll its citizens each of these districts has established a systematic data base of local citizen opinion regarding not only levels of satisfaction with programs and services but also perceptions of district strengths and weaknesses, problems facing the district, suggestions for improvement, and levels of support for considering

program and service alternatives. The findings of this study, concur with Bugher & Duckett's (1984) support of Gallup's position that local citizens are amenable to more involvement in the educational process. These data responses can be used to monitor change in citizens' opinions about their local schools over time.

Local school superintendents and boards of education can more realistically address constituent concerns if they systematically provide constituents with a forum to respond to questions addressing levels of satisfaction and perceptions of strengths and weaknesses observed in programs and services. Based upon the responses of the citizens polled in this study, it is important for district planners to seek constituent opinions from a cross section of constituents rather than to seek only the opinions of those constituents who are presently being served at any one time by the school district. By establishing a schedule for seeking local citizens' opinions about their schools, school districts can definitively combat DeYoung's (1989) contention that "many if not most rural students in America, may be 'at risk'" (p.40).

Due to the lack of social capital in rural communities, local rural school administrators need to work harder than their larger school counterparts to maintain community interest in and involvement with the schools.

It is concluded that districts ought to develop systematic reporting processes to keep the community informed about the programs and services available at the local school district. This conclusion supports the findings of Gardener (1983) found, based on his study of rural Montana schools, that there was a need for more interaction between the public and the school. Gathering systematic information from school district constituents can serve as a critical mass of information to be considered as local school district superintendents and boards of education evaluate school district programs and services. Planning to meet current needs and assimilating data over time can assist districts in resource allocation decisions as well as in reporting to the public what school programs and services are available as well as addressing issues of quality with programs and services. Systematic communication with local citizens is critical to the

life and support of the local school district. Superintendents and local boards of education need to clearly designate personnel responsibility for systematic reporting of school district programs and services.

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Table 1

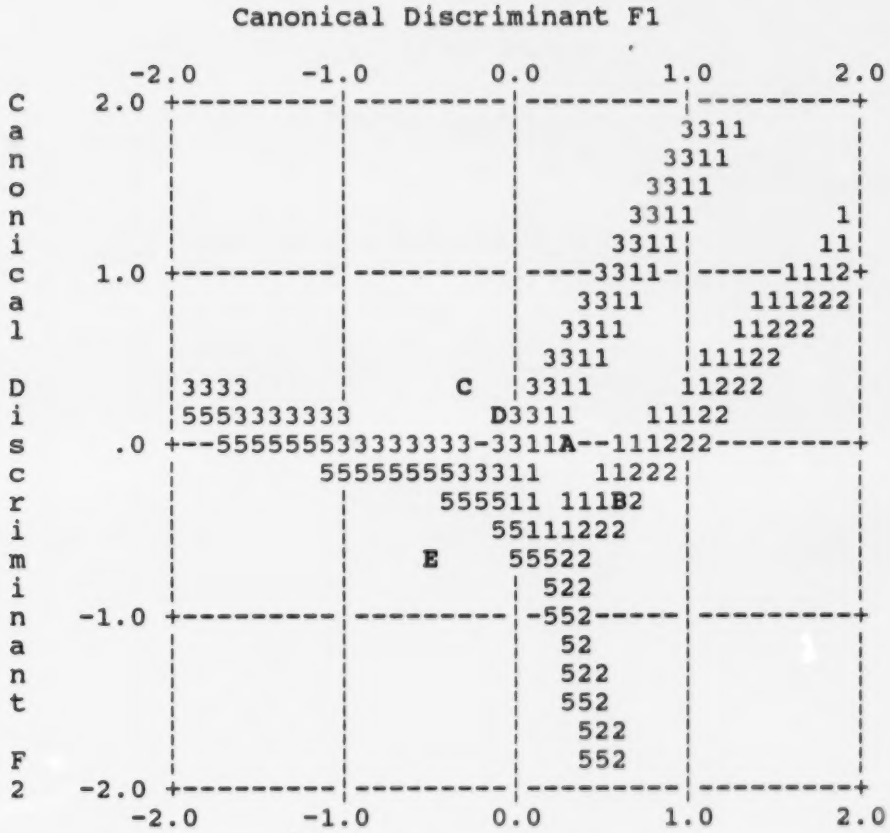
Factor Analysis Final Statistics

Factor	Eigenvalue	Pct of Var	Cum Pct
1	7.743	18.0	18.0
2	2.933	6.8	24.8
3	2.728	6.3	31.2
4	2.515	5.8	37.0
5	1.835	4.3	41.3
6	1.664	3.9	45.2
7	1.486	3.5	48.6
8	1.451	3.4	52.0
9	1.363	3.2	55.2
10	1.249	2.9	58.1
11	1.179	2.7	60.8
12	1.139	2.6	63.5

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Territorial Map of the Two Significant (p = .05) Canonical Discriminant Functions. The "*" indicates a District Centroid. Functions evaluate at the District Centroids as:

District	Function 1	Function 2
A	.29219	.03402
B	.62890	-.28930
C	-.25489	.37989
D	-.12626	.09054
E	-.50996	-.59652


Canonical Discriminant F1
-2.0
-1.0
0.0
1.0
2.0
Canonical Discriminant F2
2.0
1.0
.0
-1.0
-2.0
A
B
C
D
E